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Adriaan van Klinken, 'HIV/AIDS Crisis and Christianity', in *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South*, ed. by Mark A. Lamport, p. 353-354 (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

HIV/AIDS CRISIS AND CHRISTIANITY

Since the early 1980s, when HIV (the virus causing AIDS) was discovered in the United States, the world has witnessed the emergence of a global pandemic. According to the UNAIDS 2015 statistics, since the beginning of the pandemic 78 million people have been infected with HIV and about 35 million people have subsequently died of AIDS. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region most affected, with an estimated 65-70% of HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths of the total numbers globally. Among other forms of transmission, HIV is transmitted sexually. While in the US it was initially known as the 'gay disease', in Africa it hit all sections of society, in particular youths and young adults, with the majority of infections occurring among women (about 55%), indicating a mainly heterosexual spread of the disease. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a widespread perception of AIDS being a disease for 'sinners', in other words, a 'punishment from God' for promiscuity. This contributed heavily to the stigmatization of people living with HIV, not at least in church communities where they sometimes were excluded from Holy Communion or where pastors refused to lead the funeral of a person who died because of AIDS. Significant progress has been made to address and transform such perceptions, as well as the underlying theologies, not at least thanks to the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative (EHAIA). The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ appeared to be particularly meaningful to address issues of stigma and discrimination. The notion that 'the body of Christ is HIV positive' powerfully expresses a sense of inclusivity and solidarity within the church – locally but also globally (Byamugisha, Raja and Chitando, 2012). African women theologians have actively interrogated the gendered face of the pandemic, revealing the deadly effects of patriarchal traditions in African cultures as well as churches (Phiri, Masenya and Haddad, 2003).

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Churches, however, have also been at the forefront of providing support to people living with HIV. The Catholic Church, in particular, has been leading in developing home-based care programs. Pentecostal churches, typically working in a paradigm of spiritual power, responded to the disease through practices of healing, sometimes understood in contrast to medical treatment but usually in more holistic ways (Adogame 2007). HIV prevention became also a crucial task churches engaged in. The general ABC prevention message (Abstain, Be faithful or Condomize) was frequently rephrased in, for example, Always Be Chaste, revealing the discomfort of churches to promote condoms. With HIV recently becoming a public health concern in South East Asia and South America, churches there can learn from the experiences in Africa.

References and Resources

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